

## ISLAM: THE FRIGHTENING RELIGIOUS OTHERNESS

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of the changing role of religion in geopolitical relations, and in connections with the identified global threats to humankind (such as terrorism, organized crime, human trafficking, etc.), a considerable number of theorists and ideologues focused on the problem of security are relating these threats to the growing activeness of religious minorities in various parts of the world, and specifically of supporters of the extreme, fundamentalist version of Islam. Speaking of security, we must inevitably think of fears. The latter are about personal and public safety or the anxiety that society may stop functioning. Widespread fears have a corrosive, long-term effect on social cohesion and stability. The social exclusion of ever-greater groups of people spreads to more and more spheres, such as those of the economy, the market, politics, education, healthcare, etc. The increasing marginalization of groups of people, and the inability of institutions to resolve the problem, result in the search for a scapegoat – the role of such may fall upon the political elites, ethnic minorities, migrants. Identifying an enemy is a precondition of social conflict. We are increasingly afraid of one another as we have become accustomed to believing that our worlds are so different that their meeting would bring about the end of at least one of them. Labeling, supported by passionate qualifications, has proved to be a universal way of dealing with the unfamiliar. Woe to him who cannot define himself and continues naively to believe we can live together without the aid of stereotypes. The oldest and strongest human emotion is fear, and the oldest and strongest fear is that of the unknown. Some of the images related to contemporary Islam are formed not within the House of Islam, but where the religious community is obliged to coexist with others. The change of representations of the so-called European Islam can be identified in Bulgarian reality as well. The willingness to adopt and follow certain principles of conduct typical for the arguments of fundamentalism grows in direct proportion with the growing variety of the immediate social environments of Muslims. In fact, the spaces of fundamentalist interpretation of the religious canon are formed not within the traditional Muslim communities but at the points of their active contacts with other cultural and religious models.

**KEYWORDS:** ISLAM, SECURITY, FEAR, ENEMY, FUNDAMENTALISM, COMMUNITY, NEIGHBORHOOD, TENSION, CONFLICT, OTHERNESS

The first level at which we may construct arguments for the formulation of new research questions is connected to the specific dimensions of the desecularization process, as discussed by Peter Berger. In this sense, is it possible to assume that religious faith is able once again to reintegrate the everyday representations of people regarding the significance of their difference with regard to the others? Is it possible that the post-modern situation will form a new need for belonging in terms of the total identification framework of religion? And if so, how is the representation of religious difference constructed? What levels of commensurability or opposition are being articulated with respect to the religiousness of the Other? Beyond the abstract dimensions of interaction between different religious systems, new challenges arise for researchers of the field of religiously reconstructed social reality of neighborhood. Assuming that the level of shared, immediate social experience is correlated with higher tolerance towards religious difference, how true is it that the absence of tolerance will always provoke higher levels of conflict and non-recognition of the right of the Other to be different? In other words, if the spatial and social differences are in direct proportion to each other, can we assume that it is possible to achieve a shared perspective on the right of equality of what pertains to the Other even when it is not part of the everyday life of people? Hence, can the declared tolerance continue to be a substitute basis for building a set of shared cultural values? In the context of present-day Bulgarian reality, do we have reason to claim that specifically religious distances and tensions are arising, or are we witnessing a fervid loyalty to religious dogma as a means for compensating for the long period of declared and militant atheism? Even more concretely, would Islam be such a problem for Bulgarian society if it were not negatively linked to a dramatic part of Bulgarian history? May we expect that rejection and disregard for the right of existence of a different religious doctrine would exist in the same degree towards other world religions, such as Buddhism for instance? Is this a matter of attitude toward a different religion or a complex set of ascribed characteristics, a kind of attributive identity of every cultural difference, perceived as favored or legitimized through unequal access to power or other deficit resources?

The traditional scale of sociological analysis treating of the relations between secular and religious, between the sacred and

the profane, is no longer sufficient for interpreting the similarities in meaning or the essential differences between the democratic norms on one hand and the revived religious practices in the Muslim environment on the other. In interpretations of the on-going processes in the Islamic life-world, there prevails a schematic understanding of Islam, which views this religion as opposed to the very notion of democracy, civil rights, and personal liberties. The leading schema of interpretation in this case has acquired the form of the following syllogism: *Every form of Islam is a fundamentalism; Every fundamentalism is terrorism; Therefore, every form of Islam is terrorism.*

But reality actually offers many reasons for rethinking such a schema of interpretation. Religious values, as general representations and as a picture of the world, influence not only the individual attitudes and behavior but also the degree of tolerance and social solidarity between different ethnic-religious communities. Against the backdrop of the new fundamentalisms and the accelerated social transformations brought about by the so-called second modernity that characterizes the risk society, the problem of values becomes increasingly topical in a sociological and philosophical aspect. The integrative and disintegrative functions of values and their instrumentalization may lead either to the consolidation or to the breakdown of social ties; so knowledge of these functions is crucial as a possible remedy for the kind of active ignorance that involves suppression of, or disregard for, the real problems that exist.

Some basic questions need to be answered:

- How do the representations of Muslims encompass simultaneously the image of the citizen on one hand and, on the other, the Islamic religious identity formed under the conditions of a new horizon (the global media and the intensified religious consciousness leading the faithful to ever-deeper layers of their religiosity) that draws the local community into a unified Ummah?
- Is it possible to correlate religious freedom and freedom in a democratic society; in other words, to juxtapose freedom as a personal, political, and economic choice and freedom in the religious sense?

- Is there an area of shared interpretations and moral norms that mediates between the democratic vs. the religious principles in the Muslim environment?
- Is an Islamic modernity possible, and if so, how would it be related to the democratic values of an essentially secular political system?

In a methodological aspect, the analysis of Islam under conditions of modernity may be situated in the context of the dichotomy "traditional vs. modern". The two sides of this dichotomy should be taken as ideal types in the Weberian sense. Ideal types are instruments for achieving the tasks of the social sciences. Attempts had been made to use ideal types even before Max Weber, but without methodological awareness, so that confusion occurs between ideal types and the laws of historical generalization. Weber's ideal types are not colored by value judgments and are not related to "perfection", except in terms of logical perfection. They are not generic concepts, i.e., they are not a set of traits that pertain to all the objects belonging to a certain class. Nor are they statistical averages. They are not the constant essence of things, which is gradually discovered in the course of investigation. *The ideal type is an instrument constructed by the researcher in order to structure the in-itself amorphous reality and to thereby make possible the understanding of that reality.* In its conceptual purity, the ideal type is not to be found in empirical reality. The elements of the ideal type are empirical in origin, but they are stylized, and their assembly into a unified mental picture represents a completely artificial construction. The closer the investigated reality comes to the ideal type, the more it lends itself to comprehension according to the chosen viewpoint. If a given ideal type proves to be of no heuristic value and does not enable an interpretative understanding of empirical reality, for the purpose of which it was mentally constructed, it should be discarded and another ideal type should be constructed in its place, which should be tested in turn by means of empirical study. Ideal types are neither "true" nor "false". They are only an intellectual game, the purpose of which is to attain knowledge of concrete cultural phenomena and their structure, their determining conditions (Weber 1968).

The ideologists of the Islamic revival have developed the doctrine that the modernization of the Muslim community is to be achieved only through the prism of religion; they have argued the need for a contemporary interpretation of Islam that matches the challenges of modern times. The revival and transformation of Islam provoked by its dynamic encounter with a constellation of rationalities that modernity represents reveals the specific connection of Islamic activism to the process of modernization. This process is understood in a specific way, whereby modernity is not perceived as a transition from theonomy to autonomy and as a shift of the emphasis of meaning from the past to the future. In taking advantage of the modern achievements of science and technology, Islamic activism restricts the use of the technological innovations of Western science only to the dissemination of Islam.

The process of religious revival of Muslims in Bulgaria cannot be simply interpreted as re-Islamization, as some researchers are inclined to see it. It is rather a rediscovery and re-affirming of the values of Islam as a philosophy of life and a moral practice under the conditions of growing diversity of cultural models of social integration. In itself, this process cannot be defined either as encouraging social integration or as a kind of incitement to closure to, and distancing from, the rest of society. It is rather a sort of community response to the disintegration processes and growing social inequalities in Bulgarian society today. The traditional Muslim community used to maintain its own cultural measure without trying to spread its values via active dialogue with the other religious groups, especially not in open debate with the official atheism of state policy. Today's forms of religious mobilization in the Muslim community are significantly different, especially in respect to its willingness not only to strictly follow the requirements of the religious canon but also to preach the values of Islam. The so-

called folk Islam has been deeply rethought in the context of modern democratic development and under the impact of contradictory trends that have been defined as a *new Islamic culture* and that indicate the effort being made to build a new, specifically Islamic, modernity (Bosakov 2015).

The analysis of the Islamic community (the Ummah) as a space of total identity can be meaningfully conducted in two basic aspects: the existing notion of community that Muslims have, and the specific nature of the mutual personal and community ties that the faithful maintain when coexisting with the Others. The unwavering idealization of the Ummah in both the historical and theological aspect is a trend that shapes individual and collective consciousness. People are seen as either believers in Allah or infidels. Territories and countries are either "the House of Islam" or "the House of War". Armed conflicts are either a "holy war" for the true faith or "internecine conflict" (Fitnah). Taxation is either sanctioned by Sharia law or is non-legitimate, etc. In this concrete but comprehensive sense, religious affiliation, the belonging to the Ummah, is established, maintained and transmitted as the fundament of a person's life; it turns into a total identity. Given the dissolved boundaries between the religious and the secular sphere, the religious norms become a factor that regulates and largely predetermines the social and political reality in the Ummah. In Islamic cannon, all possible human activities are encompassed by two categories: permissible (halal) and prohibited (Haram). The religious identity of the true believer would be impossible without this all-encompassing regulation. In other words, all values in Islam are refracted through the lense of "religion", which is not one value among others but is the integral environment that determines, encourages or penalizes human conduct. How is the integration of the faithful within modern society and the nation state made possible? To what degree are the inner dynamics and cohesion of the Islamic community influenced by the transformations occurring in society? (Given that these are transformation whose historical memory is linked to a different religious dimension and whose political development in history includes periods of passionate rejection of all religious traditions.) Closely connected with these two questions are two essential aspects of the norm in the Islamic community: *1. The prescribed rules of relations and conduct in the family, and 2. Canonic principles of the relation between parents and children and, in a broader aspect, between adults and young people.*

Regardless of the canonic differences between various religions, each of them expresses an image of an enduring, meaningfully ordered world. This image attains its ultimate justification by turning into a certain way of life. In this sense, religious values, as a driving force of individual and collective actions, serve as an explanatory reference point that gives us access to the social dimensions of religion. The analysis of the influence of religious convictions upon people's everyday life illuminates an important dimension of their religiousness. The latter inevitably includes actions undertaken out of religious motives that carry religious meaning. In other words, by shedding light on the mutual connection between religious attitudes on one hand and values such as justice, family and work on the other, it is possible to answer the question to what extent these values are a resource for constructing the meaning of the community ties and/or strengthening them. In the perspective of dialogical sociology and the tools of the European Values Study (data for Bulgaria, Fourth Wave 2008/2009) we find that the processes of growingly dynamic influence of religious identity are typical not so much for a homogenous religious environment as for the Muslim communities that co-exist with other ethnic-religious group (Bosakov 2009).

How is the full integration of a religious community like the Islamic one into modern Bulgarian society possible? Significant changes have taken place in traditional Bulgarian Islam. One of the basic actors of these changes at present are the young Muslims who are now still in high school or university.

They are the future spiritual elite of the Muslim community in Bulgaria and will contribute to the formation and consolidation of new dimensions and dynamics in the process of integration. The attitudes and standpoints of these young people, the values they uphold, will to a great degree define the direction that the process of integration of religious communities takes in the secular democratic political model. That is why part of the research efforts for understanding the integration problem of the Islamic community in modern Bulgarian society should be increasingly focused on analyzing the representations, reasons and arguments of the spiritual and intellectual elite of the Muslim community in Bulgaria. Together with this, we share the view that the Muslim community in our country is singular only in the perceptions of non-Muslims. The internal differentiation and fragmentation in the life world of present-day Islam is a fact of fundamental importance that must not be underestimated. That is precisely why the focus of research is, among other things, the internal heterogeneity in what is perceived to be the unified impact of religious education in the Muslim milieu.

The analysis indicates that the scope of declared tolerance is much greater than it seemed to be in the past, or, at least, that our striving to distinguish stable processes of social integration with respect to cultural development have diminished the critical attitude towards some of the obtained results. There is no reason to presume there has been a qualitative change in the level of knowledge about the religious foundations of the Other. Over a comparatively long period of time (during the past twenty years at least) the importance of spatial proximity in the everyday reality of cultural variety has remained the same. The boundaries of real dialogue and tolerance remain strongly dependent on the direct shared experience in life and society of individuals from different ethnic-religious groups. Hence the attitude towards Islam in Bulgaria confronts us with a far more important issue – that of the limits to which the fear of what is different can be surmounted. Are there reasons to believe there is a new Islamic culture in Bulgaria, or is this rather a question of a specific kind of religious modernization that retains the fundamental postulates of the faith while shifting them into a new social context and building a space of dialogue with the democratic values currently being established in Bulgarian society? (Bosakov 2010).

One of the major problems related to research on Islam continues to be the degree of legitimacy of its representatives and the measure of shared meanings and symbols interpreted in a communication context. The question is: who is actually speaking on behalf of Islam – in Europe, throughout the world, and in our country? How valid is the exchange of thoughts and the mutual understanding in the space of public debate? Is there a double perspective, a specific communication strategy of the Muslim community, which may be sending out certain messages outside and different messages inwardly, to the brothers and sisters in the community? Could this double meaning be part of the reason for the lack of mutual understanding, or does the reason lie mostly in the various dimensions of the phenomenon that we traditionally define as a crisis of identity?

The transformation of the representations regarding the so-called European Islam can be identified in Bulgarian reality. The willingness to accept and obey certain rules of behavior typical for fundamentalism grows according to the variety of the immediate social environment. In fact, the spaces of fundamental interpretation of the religious canon are formed not where the traditional Muslim community exists and develops, but at the borderline of its active contacts with other cultural and religious models.

With time research is clearly confirming the hypothesis that the attitude towards ethnic and, even more so, religious difference is mediated and defined to a great degree by the problem of power. Concrete cases taken from the Bulgarian political environment prove the high degree of connection and mutual

dependence between the forms and intensity of religious separation on one hand and access to power resources on the other. That is why every attempt at taking a partisan approach to the problem or using it for short-term political aims, essentially enhances the feeling of otherness in the Muslims, perceived by them as a situation of inequality, and hence strengthens the internal ties within the community and the search for new grounds of difference from the society at large. The processes of religious revival among Muslims in Bulgaria cannot be interpreted one-sidedly as a threat against the secular nature of the state or social peace. Above all, they indicate the need for dialogue. Passing from negative to positive polarization is possible only by increasing dialogue, by active interaction which preserves differences as an incentive for integration. In the perspective of "dialogical sociology", but also in a wider cultural sense, integration into contemporary Bulgarian society cannot be looked upon only as coexistence or as attracting the smaller cultural communities into the majority's behavior model. It is precisely in a country like Bulgaria, where Islam and Christianity have coexisted for centuries, that dialogue, now more than ever, is the only means for effective integration and consolidation of the national community. The demonstrative, socially desirable tolerance, registered in most sociological studies, actually bears within itself a set of restrictions and suppressed conflicts that inform toleration. In the field of meanings and symbols defined as tolerance and toleration, we find projected an important part of the transformation of attitudes towards Islam and towards religious otherness in general. The Bulgarian tradition permits approaching Islam in a way that corresponds to its syncretic character and to the Bulgarian history of neighborly relations. By its significant meanings and symbolic colouring, neighborhood, as direct contact and direct spatial proximity with others, defines everyday life. This is the micro social scale in which the real dimensions of individual achievement are situated and the conditions for success are estimated. The need to comprehensively study this question in terms of space stems from the understanding of identity as a quality that is invariably a result and a condition achieved in the course of relating to others and comparing with others (in this sense, identity is the result of a qualitative definition of the Other). Ethnoreligious distances reveal the parameters of a "contactless tolerance": in cases when assertions are proposed that do not require direct contact with others, there is greater willingness to look for socially desirable answers. Any concrete attempt to introduce religious awareness of the "others" in a situation of immediate contact leads to decreased potential willingness to accept those different others. The gap between a consistent compliance with religious morality and norms on one hand and the idea of the orthopraxis of the other religious community on the other, generates mistrust, disregard and suspicion as to the motives of people of a different faith. These attitudes correspond to a latent ethno-religious conflict, which is liable to secondary mobilization by political and economic means. In other words, neighborhood, as a universal social network of everyday practices, is able to compensate for some of the tensions, but its influence remains confined within the framework of a contradiction in mass consciousness – the contradiction between a positive attitude to the neighbor who is of a certain religious confession and, at the same time, suspicion with regard to that religious community as a whole ((Bosakov 2006).

In looking for the means to overcome the feeling of offended religious identity among the minority, an identity that it often perceives as being under threat, a careful sociological scrutiny of the culture of neighborhood and of the importance of neighborhood identifies the following states and processes: (Bosakov 2000)

- Growing modernization in everyday life is severely trying for part of the meaning and symbolism of a religion. With respect to Islam in particular, this is one of the fundamental challenges of the new millennium: to devise a model of Islamic modernity in which the basic norms of Islam will preserve their importance, while the elements of the

postmodern age that are forcefully entering into the life of society will be integrated without contradiction in the body of ethical views and values typical for the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of Islam;

- The admissibility of religiousness is not yet closely matched by respect for the right of others to be different and to follow religious norms different from one's own;
- The negative trends of development in the relations between tolerance vs. toleration of a different religious identity is a sign of an unfocused mass consciousness (toleration is primarily determined by the restricted option to be other than tolerant, rather than by an authentic culture of tolerance and respect for the different others).

The arguments in support of democratic values, which are usually centered around human rights (that seem particularly problematic in the practice of Sharia) are still not convincing enough for the youngest generations of Muslim living in multicultural societies. The very principle of multiculturalism, based on recognition of the right of difference of others, does not seem adequately protected in the everyday practice of present-day public life. The right to difference and acceptance of difference does not exhaust the problem of coexistence, where the building of a community seems to depend on the expanding influence of the fundamental values of that community. The norm of multiculturalism is only the first step, the mandatory precondition for engaging in dialogue with difference. At least for the time being, it seems that Western civilization and Bulgarian society are not prepared to take the next step and maintain their values while engaging in dialogue on terms of equality in the course of building new, supra-religious communities. The notion that integration amounts to unification or assimilation based on acculturation, on partial elimination of the cultural grounds of difference is leading, more than ever, to the reverse result. Decreasingly effective is the prospect of some kind of social integration that should compensate for the lack of shared values as a basis of coexistence. Representation can no longer make up for the lack of equality. Encouraging participation, even in the completely ineffective form of quota representation, has long since ceased to be the answer to the problem of quality integration into Bulgarian society. Formal recognition of the right to hold a different opinion does not signify willingness to accept this opinion as being of an equal standing or equally significant and valuable in building a shared notion of reality. Respect for difference must grow into willingness to have a personal position in an expanding space of mutually accepted dialogue that is perceived as a necessary part of life in society. Only then will the existence of different ethnic, cultural, and religious communities become a guarantee of the viability and integrity of the national community itself. The construction of an integration model based on authentic dialogue is yet to come. Without knowledge of difference and otherness, there can be no field for dialogue, which is the proper place for the encounter between "us" and "them". Such knowledge is also a powerful means for reducing the ethno-religious distances that make difference and otherness grow into alienness. The changing reality in society is continuously putting in question the framework of the stereotypical knowledge of others that restricts people's expectations and their willingness for joint efforts.

In Europe, the Other is primarily the Muslim. The latter is most often an immigrant, whose social position is defined almost entirely by his/her limited access to resources. The Muslim is viewed as part of the risks involved in the modern European way of life and security (Wodak 2015). But the moral defect of the modern society is greed – a greed that allows market values to penetrate the lifeworld of people that has traditionally been guided by nonmarket norms. As a result of this expansion, social relationships come to be

shaped in the image of the market. The trends dictated by our times are manifest in a great variety of areas: in consumption, technological standards, mass popular culture, youth subcultures and counter-cultures, the media and advertising, and even in elite forms of art, science and philosophy. But they all have one thing in common: directly or indirectly, these trends stem from the advance of the all-powerful global market. In recent decades the financial levers and formalized vocabulary of the market have been imposed as a kind of social algebra in widely different areas of life: the neo-liberal mantras such as efficiency, accountability, strategic planning, the project principle, optimized use of resources, maximized profit, etc., have colonized spheres of life that are quite remote from the economy, including education, healthcare, creativity, innovation, knowledge, the art market, and have oriented these spheres to results that are "immediately measurable" in an economic and managerial perspective. But is this neo-liberal religion not turning democracy, the liberal ideals, the freedom of the individual, the arts, the quality of life, etc., from values in themselves, into conditions, "dependent variables", that are important only insofar as they influence economic development? The difference between market economy and market society is this: a market economy is a means – a valuable and important means – for organizing our productive capacity. The market society, to the contrary, is a way of life where market values permeate all aspects of human striving and effort. It is a place where social relations are molded in the image of the market. The only escape from this apocalyptic situation lies in the transformation of modern democracy by means of civic control, prevention and indictment, which might put a stop to the escalating loss of legitimacy of the procedures of representative democracy and of the figures of the politician, the scientist, the expert and the judge.

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